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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to compare the attitudes of preschool children toward their program experiences and school adjustment, in order to ascertain whether differences existed among program type, age, and gender variables. A total of 90 preschool boys and girls 3 to 5 years of age from a church-related program, a Montessori program, and a Head Start program participated in the study. Children were surveyed using a self-report instrument, and teachers rated the children's adjustment to school environments. Results indicated that the attitudes toward program experiences of those children in the church-related program were different from those of children in the Montessori and Head Start programs. Results suggest that, in view of the increased emphasis on early childhood programs and the establishment of numerous preschool programs, such programs for young children should be evaluated from many points of view, including that of the preschool child. (Author/RH)

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Preschoolers' Attitudes Toward Their Respective Early Childhood Programs

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Preschoolers' Attitudes Toward Their

Respective Early Childhood Programs

The purpose of this study was to compare the attitudes of preschoolers toward their program experiences and school adjustment to ascertain whether there were differences among program type, age, and gender variables. Ninety preschool boys and girls (three, four, and five year olds) from three early childhood programs participated in the study. Children were surveyed using a self-report instrument. Teachers also rated the preschoolers' adjustment to the school environment. Results indicate significant differences in preschoolers' attitudes when comparing programs. There was an age and gender difference related to adjustment as well as some program effects. Results suggest that with recent social developments such as increased emphasis on early childhood programs and massive preschool programs being established, there is a need to evaluate programs from many aspects, including from the point of view of the preschool child.

One of the most important questions raised when evaluating the effectiveness of educational programs is what are the attitudes of the learners toward the school and school-related activities. Strickland (1970), in his Development of a School Attitude Questionnaire for Young Children, suggests that although studies have not clarified the relationship between attitudes and the cognitive process, attitudes can be considered an important part of the affective process.

A favorable attitude toward school is generally considered a desirable objective of school programs. Federal and state educational funding now, almost always require parents and frequently students to be involved in evaluating the programs being supported. Parents and students of the school help make decisions about the school program so the school can meet the needs of the community (Davies, 1980).

Student attitude data can be useful in helping to evaluate educational programs, instructional techniques, and to guide the choice of instruction that is usually tailored to the needs of the individual students (Sax, 1974; Anastasi, 1976; Tuckman, 1979). Although most measures of student attitude toward school and instruction have been used in higher education settings (Tuckman, 1979), several recent social developments are placing emphasis on attitude assessments with young children. These developments include: (1) increased public concern for early childhood education and the establishment of numerous programs throughout the country; (2) substantial increases in the proportion of young children's parents who work outside the home and who are concerned about the effectiveness of particular programs on their children's development; (3) increased value placed on affective education and; (4) greater

attention given to the systematic evaluation of educational programs (Siewert and Koopman, 1981).

The present study was conducted to extend the work of Strickland (1970), Ball (1971), and others who have researched assessments of attitude with young children. Further research is needed to clarify efforts for developing and selecting attitude measurement techniques suitable for use with young children because, unfortunately, many times assessments of young children's attitudes (preschool, kindergarten, first, or second grade) are difficult to obtain. Children in these age groups usually cannot read or write well and classical research by Piaget, Inhelder, and other cognitive psychologists support the notion that their reactions to situations have little stability. They have a tendency to be swayed by specific, momentary considerations than that of older children or adults. For example, a preschool child may respond by saying he hates school after having fallen and skinned his knee and may show every behavioral indication that he means it. Minutes prior to falling, however, the child could have given a completely different response and may even give a positive reaction toward school later when the knee has stopped hurting. Inconsistencies as this reduces the reliability and confidence that can be placed on attitude assessments with young children.

Other research has revealed: (1) assessments of attitudes in young children can be less troublesome by comparing assessments of one group over another group (Sirotnik, 1981); (2) young children are generally eager to please adults and want to say what they think adults want them to say (Kohlberg, 1971); (3) if orally self-reports to attitude assessments are given, children are more

likely to choose latter response alternatives (Siewert and Koopman, 1981); and (4) strategies such as teacher ratings, ratings under simulated conditions, self-reports, and nonreactive or unobtrusive measures all can be employed fairly effectively in assessing the attitudes of young children (Ball, 1971).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the attitudes of young children toward their respective early childhood programs (HeadStart, Montessori, and a church-related). More specifically, this study was conducted to ascertain whether there were differences in young children's attitudes toward their school when compared with other program types. Research questions which guided the investigation included: (a) Do the attitudes of children in a particular early childhood program differ from those of another program?; (b) Does a certain environment promote a better attitude?; (c) Are attitudes affected by the age and/or sex of the children?; (d) Are attitudes influenced by adjustments to the school environment?

Method

Preliminary Procedures

A pilot study was conducted to determine whether: (1) the questions and statements used to elicit preschoolers' attitudinal responses were easily understood; (2) preschoolers understood the concepts of "happy," "sad," and "plain" faces; and (3) the number of items used to elicit attitudinal responses were adequate for preschoolers' attention span. The results of the pilot investigation found that children could understand procedures and concepts, as well as follow directions; and the number of items presented were appropriate for preschoolers' attention span.

Subjects

The subjects in this study were 90 (3, 4, and 5 year olds) from three early childhood programs in a large metropolitan area of the midwest with similar socioeconomic backgrounds (45 girls and 45 boys). A Montessori, HeadStart, and church-related programs were selected because of their different types of philosophies and practices. The preschoolers in this study were from various racial backgrounds in all the centers. Each program had the same ratio of boys and girls as well as age levels in the sample.

Procedures and Instrumentation

Children were surveyed using a self-report instrument developed by the investigator which was partially adapted from Rinckel's (1982) attitude study and other attitude questionnaires and research with young children (Strickland, 1970; Ball, 1971; Siewert and Koopman, 1981; Harter, 1982). Each child was tested individually in a single session at the site of their particular program. Each testing session was approximately 10 minutes. All subjects' responses were self-recorded on individual answer sheets.

The investigator spent a day at each program before collecting empirical data to give the children some time to acquaint themselves to a newcomer in the environment and to lessen stress when asked to participate. In addition, during this time, the investigator made informal observations of the children and interviews with teachers and directors regarding children's general attitude as well as adjustment.

Pictures of "happy," "plain," and "sad" faces were used on answer sheets for

subjects to mark their responses to eight stimulus questions and statements:

1. This is how I feel when it is time to go to school each day.
2. How do you feel about things you do in school?
3. This is how I feel about my school.
4. How do your parents feel about your school work?
5. This is how I feel about my school work.
6. This is how my teachers look at me.
7. This is how I feel when I bring something I have found or made to school.
8. This is how I feel about coming back to school next year. (Rinckel, 1982)

An example of an answer sheet is shown in Figure 1.

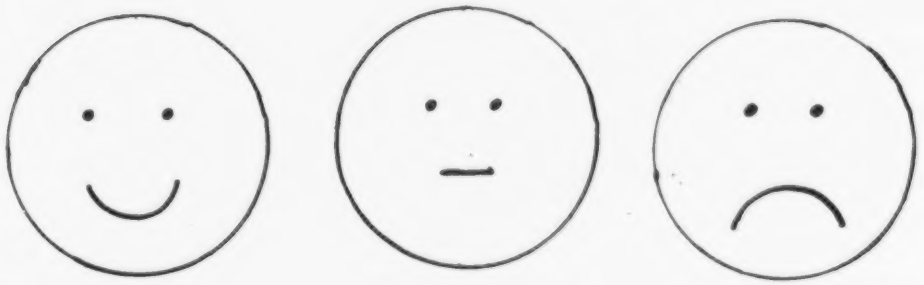

Figure 1. Example of an answer sheet for subjects to mark responses to stimulus questions and statements.

The First Grade Adjustment Scale (Medinnus, 1961) was employed by classroom teachers to rate their preschoolers' adjustment to school. The scale has five subscales in which to rate children's performance: Physical Status and Motor Behavior, Social Behavior, Emotional Behavior, Intellectual Abilities and Behavior, and Adjustment to Classroom Membership and Requirements.

Results

Statistical analyses were performed to examine whether there were any statistical significance between assessed attitudes, programs, age, sex, and adjustment. T-tests, an analysis of variance (ANOVA), and qualitative summaries were utilized. The independent variables were the different programs, age, sex, and adjustment. The dependent variable was attitude. The .05 level of significance was selected for all statistical analyses.

Table 1 presents a summary of the ANOVA results for the children's attitudes. Inspection of this table indicates a significant effect for program ($F = 7.83$; $df = 2.72$). There was a difference in young children's attitudes toward their program when compared with other children in other programs. This result lends support to previous research that students' attitude measures toward school can be useful in evaluating the effectiveness of educational programs as well as instructional techniques (Sax, 1974; Anastasi, 1976; Tuckman, 1979).

Table 1

Analysis of Variance Summary

For Subjects' Attitudes

N = 90

Source	df	ss	ms	f
Program	2	70.69	35.345	7.83*
Sex	1	4.44	4.44	0.98
Age	2	0.69	0.345	0.08
Program x Sex	2	19.36	9.68	2.14
Program x Age	4	27.31	6.828	1.51
Sex x Age	2	9.49	4.745	1.05
Program x Sex x Age	4	63.31	15.828	3.50
Error	72	325.20	4.517	

*$p \geq .05$

The church-related program was found to be significantly different from the Montessori and HeadStart program when comparing the attitudes of the preschoolers. The notion that attitudes were influenced by adjustments to the school environment could not be clearly supported by the analysis. There was not a difference in the attitudes of young children toward their program related to an age or gender factor. These results tend to suggest that influences such as age and gender differences are less consistent characteristics related to attitude measurements with young children.

Discussion

The results of this research study raise many important considerations for educational practices. With recent social developments such as increased public concern for early childhood education and numerous preschool programs being established, there is certainly a need to evaluate programs from many aspects, including from the point of view of the preschool participant. In this study, the church-related program was found to be significantly different when comparing the preschoolers' attitude. Could there possibly be religious effects on the attitudes of young children in a church-related program? Could there be teacher training or staff education effects? Future research is warranted to determine the particular influence(s) impacting the attitudes of preschoolers.

Parents are in search of information to use in deciding if a program is "right" for their children. There is definitely a need for evidence to support "good" early childhood programs which meet the needs of parents and children. The results of this study suggest a means to determine whether particular programs currently available are suited to individual children from their own perspective. Teachers and directors can use the results of investigations similar to this to modify their curriculum as well as evaluate the effectiveness of materials and activities. What better method to use than to ask preschool participants themselves how they feel about a particular aspect of their programs?

The results of this study suggest that young children between the ages of 3

and 5 have no difference in attitudes toward their programs regardless of their age or sex. It is not until later in their educational experience that age and gender differences begin to occur (Haladyna and Thomas, 1979). It would be interesting to do a longitudinal study to examine exactly when these differences begin to emerge and what factors are related to them.

There are several implications derived from this study. Attitude data of young children could shed light on the existence of a correlation between attitudes and school achievement, cross-cultural influences to various programs, parental influences, and many other important elements that could possibly be manipulated to encourage more favorable attitudes toward school and thus enhance the fields of early childhood education and child development.

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